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Pooling Ideas in Land Use Planning



FARMERS and others engaged in land use planning have heard a great deal about the "democratic process" as a way to develop plans for agricultural programs. Indeed, so much has been heard about it that perhaps many people tend to take the process for granted, and do not stop to see what it really means.

Land use planning, like many other activities in our democracy, does much of its work through committees and subcommittees that represent larger numbers of people and report their findings to those concerned. At times, some have looked upon committees as merely long-winded debating societies, yet the fact remains that committees keep on proving their usefulness as mediums for collective thinking and action.

By working together in their county meetings, committee members representing people in different localities, with different ways of thinking, and different kinds of experience, can develop common ideas and can bring to bear on any set of problems the best knowledge available for solving them. Experience has shown that democracy in planning is much more effective when those who make up land use planning committees are people with different backgrounds of experience, attitudes, and interests.

Committees Mirror Opinions of People in Areas.

The actual workings of land use planning committees tell much about what the democratic process is. In committees that accurately represent the various viewpoints and interests of the different groups of people in their areas, the committees are small representative democracies, mirroring the attitudes and interests of people in their entire area. As such, they provide a place where differences in opinions can be brought out clearly, discussed by members, and the points of general

agreement determined. This way of working out collective and united agreement upon ideas is the essence of the democratic process.

Community land use planning committees are composed entirely of farm people drawn from each neighborhood in their communities. A majority of the county committee members are farm men and women. The other members are county and farm home demonstration agents, representatives of State and Federal agricultural agencies operating in the county, vocational teachers, agricultural technicians of various kinds, and sometimes county officials and local bankers and businessmen.

When committees are made up like these, each member has a different set of experiences to draw upon, sees the common problems from a different point of vantage, and has a particular contribution to make toward conclusions of the committee as a whole. The discussions between members of the land use planning committees are, in a sense, a melting pot where the ideas, opinions, and information contributed by the different members can be fused into a common body of decision and judgment. The fire beneath the melting pot is the cooperative work of all members in striving toward a better agriculture and better living in their area. And the quantity of molten stuff that gathers in the pot—in this case the number of conclusions the committees reach agreement upon—grows rapidly as the fire mounts higher.

Each Member Contributes to Committees' Work.

Each member of a land use planning committee, if he has been chosen through the democratic methods suggested in the leaflet entitled *Membership of Land Use Planning Committees* (County Planning Series No. 2), does more than offer his own views in the sessions of his committee. Ideally, he endeavors to give information and guidance to the committee about the attitudes and views of the different groups he represents. When this task of the committee member is fully realized, each member comes to know that he can learn something from all the others and that the voice of each member must be heard effectively in arriving at plans and recommendations. If any other state of mind prevails, in fact, democratic planning cannot be accomplished. This kind of outlook is a vital element in all of democracy and one that must be considered equally by the farmers, technicians, and representatives of agricultural agencies.

Giving full opportunity for each viewpoint to be presented and for differences in opinion to be brought out into daylight is a key part of the job of each committee. Land use planning is based on agreements democratically reached within each committee about plans for its area. The first step in obtaining these agreements, therefore, is for each member to contribute his share of ideas and experience to the discussions of the group. If all the members of a committee were to know and believe and agree upon the same things right at the start, for example, it would be a mere back-slapping group. Nothing new could come out of such a committee, no matter how often it met, no matter how many resolutions it passed, no matter how many plans it made.

Democracy in Making Plans.

Land use planning is a cooperative undertaking. It is not accomplished by one or more members of the committee silencing another member, triumphing over him, or out-voting him. Cooperative planning is accomplished by arriving at a collective solution that each member believes is wiser and more serviceable than he could possibly have worked out alone. Plans and conclusions reached in this fashion can then be presented directly to the people in areas represented by the committee, can be discussed with them at public meetings, and remolded, if necessary, to reflect more accurately their ideas and opinions about their problems. Because the work is based upon democratic representation and policies in the very beginning, not only is less remolding of plans and conclusions called for when these reach the public, but also greater public interest in getting action upon the plans is assured.

Land use planning is a cooperative task from the grass roots up. It is not a one-man or a one-group job but something that every committee member has to take part in freely if best results are to be obtained. If a member goes to a committee meeting solely to give advice, he finds he teaches little to the other members and learns little himself, except the value of keeping still. If he comes solely to listen, he finds he cannot profit from the meeting as much as he would if he joined in the discussions, and he certainly does not contribute much to the deliberations of the group. It is essential that each member, therefore, be willing to give and to take, to talk and to listen, to convince and to be convinced, to reason and to be reasoned with, as occasion demands.

Planning Calls for Give-and-Take Spirit.

When a member of the committee lacks the give-and-take spirit, he misses the valuable truth that lies in the old story: "I have a dollar and you have a dollar. You give me your dollar and I give you my dollar, and each of us still has a dollar. But I have an idea and you have an idea. You give me your idea and I give you my idea, and each of us has two ideas."

This story illustrates the way the democratic process works and the way real planning is accomplished. But there is more to it than merely piling up ideas. The committees do not arrive at conclusions simply by adding together ideas as they might add so many marbles or apples. Instead, they reach common conclusions by means of expressing ideas, by the action of these individual ideas on each other, and finally by the melting of these ideas and actions into an alloy, or synthesis of ideas. Once the synthesis is achieved, it belongs to everybody, because everybody helped to create it. This synthesis is not merely a high-sounding name for a resolution that has been adopted by a majority vote; it is what comes when people think a problem through together so completely that it is not even necessary for them to take a vote.

If the only thing a committee could accomplish was to add together the ideas which each member brought to the meeting, then it would be necessary for someone else to attempt to mold these ideas into a plan. That would obviously be impossible under a democratic system of planning, because democracy calls for free and voluntary agreement upon ideas as well as plans.

Synthesis of Ideas Grows Democratically.

A synthesis of ideas, on the other hand, does grow from democratic processes. It is what comes when ideas act continuously upon one another, so that not only are all ideas added together but new ones are created in the process. The result is that the points on which there is a common understanding and agreement increase rapidly. In the beginning, this common understanding is likely to cover a comparatively narrow range. As the committee gets deeper into its work and discusses the various features of these problems, new considerations come into being, and new grounds of agreement and planning are found.

To illustrate just what does happen and how it happens, it may be simpler to think of a county committee that has only three members, Mr. A, Mr. B, and Mr. C.

One member of this imaginary committee, Mr. A, is a middle-aged farmer who has lived and farmed in the county for 20 years. He gained his first knowledge about farming from his father, but he has also learned a great deal by observing his neighbors and from his own experience.

Another member, Mr. B, is the representative of an agricultural agency that operates in the county. He has never farmed for himself, possibly, but was born and reared on a farm in the same part of the country, and has learned a great deal from the farmers with whom he has worked. His principal skill lies, however, in administrative experience and knowledge of what his agency can do to help farmers in the county and of methods it can use to give this help.

The third member, Mr. C, is a scientist. He does not know the locality as well as either the farmer member or the agency representative, but he knows scientific facts that neither of the other members has had a chance to learn and possesses much useful information on agricultural conditions and problems.

These three members, let us say, come together to discuss the problems of the farmers and of agriculture in the county. Each has his own particular contribution to make in the development of conclusions about needed action, and each may have his own ideas about what should be done. Each comes with a different background of experience, and with a different point of view.

Ideas of All Begin to Grow.

When these members begin discussing the problems of the county, something immediately happens to the ideas and attitudes of each one of them, because of the influence of what the other two members are thinking and saying. The ideas of all begin to grow as each member comes to see more clearly the reasons behind the opinions of the other members.

Even in the beginning, there probably are certain general ideas and attitudes upon which all the members are in agreement, but as their understanding grows concerning the ideas and attitudes of the other members, the number of conclusions upon which they can agree also grows.

Suppose, for example, that the farmer, Mr. A, speaks first. By the time he has finished his first remarks, the original ideas of Mr. B, the agency representative, and Mr. C, the scientist, have been colored by what he has said.

Mr. B, the agency representative, talks next. His ideas, however, are not exactly what he started with, but are modified to include something of Mr. A's ideas.

Now Mr. C, the scientist, speaks. His ideas, however, are no longer those he brought into the meeting, for they now include some part of the ideas advanced by both Mr. A and Mr. B. As he talks, then, the ideas of both Mr. A and Mr. B undergo further modification. When he finishes, the ideas held by all are likely to have changed very much from the way they were at the start. And since a three-man committee is quite small, each member has a chance to join several times in the discussion, thus repeating the process again and again.

Common Understanding is Developed.

Each committee member thus modifies his ideas and improves his understanding of the common problems through discussion. The process that occurs through discussion does something else, too, for by this means a great body of common understanding is developed. It is this common understanding that makes up the collective idea or agreement of ideas in the committee. Each committee member, when planning has reached this stage, appreciates so definitely the contributions that the others have made that he would be totally unwilling to make a decision solely on the basis of the ideas he had when he came to the meeting. The result is not a compromise in which each has given up a part of his ideas, but a mixture into which each has poured his own ideas and in which he sees his own contribution and those of others.

It can be seen that these members would not begin by trying to develop agreements but would start by seeking a basis of common understanding. If an agreement were sought by a vote at the beginning of the meeting, it could be reached, perhaps, but what would the vote then have meant? It would have meant that each member had given up something, or felt he had done so, in order to reach a compromise. It would have meant, too, that the interests of one of the members might really require a different answer for him. The agreement also would have been limited by the lack of knowledge and cooperation shown by the member who understood least about the problems and was least cooperative. If the agreement had been pushed beyond his understanding, he might have been outvoted, but could not possibly have agreed.

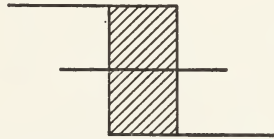
Let us attempt to diagram the development of the increasing body of common understanding which has been developed during the committee meeting:

THE PROCESS OF ENLARGING AREAS OF COMMON UNDERSTANDING AND AGREEMENT

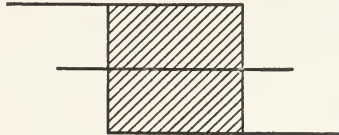
Area of Common Understanding



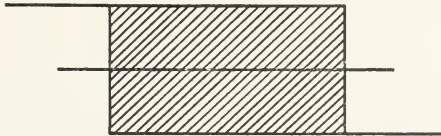
There is a considerable area of common understanding before planning work starts, because all members of the committee know and believe some of the same things. Each, however, knows and believes some things the others do not.



After all members have presented their ideas and information, each has learned something from the other two, and thus the area of common understanding begins to be enlarged..



With continued work and discussion, each teaches the others and learns from the others. In this process two things happen; Each enlarges his own understanding, and the area of common understanding constantly increases



By continued exchange of ideas, presumably all members would finally understand all issues, and common understanding would be complete. This, however, is not easy to accomplish or likely to result. What does happen is that a large body of common understanding is developed which makes possible unified action over that whole area, but unified action is not possible over any wider area than that of common understanding.

Community and County Groups Profit From Process.

This illustration, the case of Mr. A, Mr. B, and Mr. C, reduces the democratic process to simplest terms. A real county committee, of course, will have from 15 to 25 members. This means that it will take more time for discussion and for arriving at a common understanding, but it also means that many more persons will be contributing to the common pool of understanding. Furthermore, in many instances, each member of the committee represents a community committee and therefore brings to each committee meeting a synthesis of ideas developed in community committee meetings. He will take back to his next community meeting his broader understanding of common attitudes and problems, and thus will be a different conferee because of his experience in the county committee meeting.

These experiences are repeated month after month in land use planning, first by interchange of ideas in community committee meetings, and then by an interchange of ideas between representatives of communities at the county meeting, until something approaching a unified county plan is achieved by means of the democratic process.

Previous publications in this County Planning Series:

- No. 1—County Land Use Planning.
- No. 2—Membership of Land Use Planning Committees.
- No. 3—The Land Use Planning Organization.
- No. 4—The Scope of Land Use Planning.